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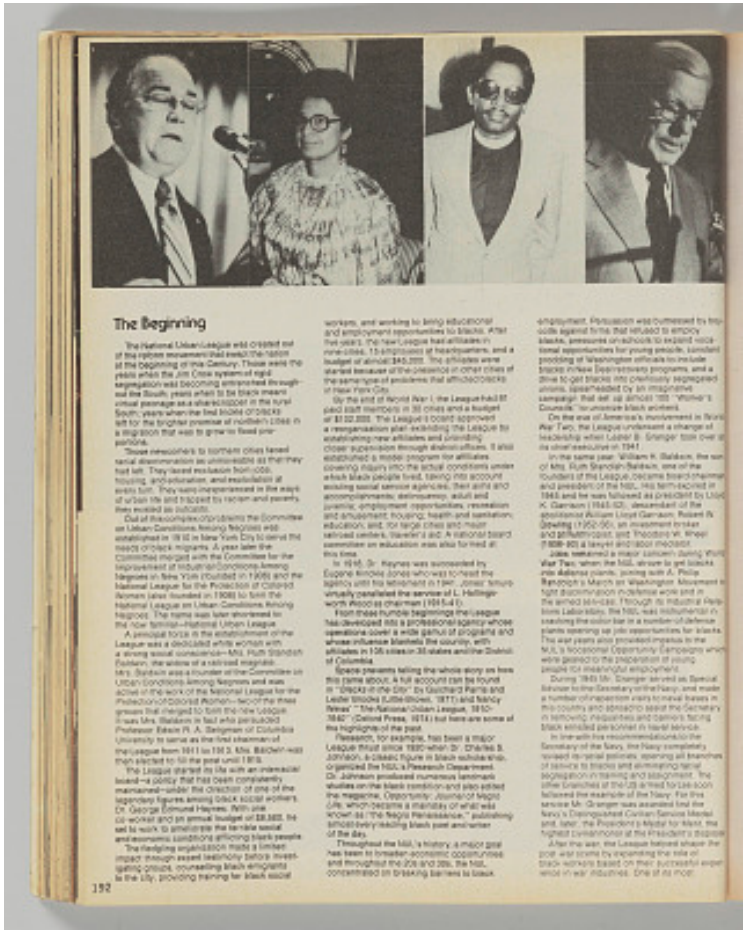

The Beginning

The National Urban League was created out of the reform movement that swept the nation at the beginning of this Century. Those were the years when the Jim Crow system of rigid segregation was becoming entrenched throughout the south; years when to be black meant virtual peonage as a sharecropper in the rural South; years when the first trickle of blacks left for the brighter promise of northern cities in a migration that was to grow to flood proportions.

Those newcomers to northern cities faced racial discrimination as unmovable as that they had left. They faced exclusion from jobs, housing, and education, and exploitation at every turn. They were inexperienced in the ways of urban life and trapped by racism and poverty, they existed as outcasts.

Out of this complex of problems the Committee on Urban Conditions Among Negroes was established in 1910 in New York City to serve the needs of black migrants. A year later the Committee merged with the Committee for the Improvement of Industrial Conditions Among Negroes in New York (founded in 1906) and the National League for the Protection of Colored Women (also founded in 1906) to form the National League on Urban Conditions Among Negroes. The name was later shortened to the now familiar - National Urban League.

A principal force in the establishment of the League was a dedicated white woman with a strong social conscience—Mrs. Ruth Standish Baldwin, the widow of a railroad magnate. Mrs. Baldwin was a founder of the Committee on Urban Conditions Among Negroes and was active in the work of the National League for the Protection of Colored Women—two of the three groups that merged to form the new League. It was Mrs. Baldwin in fact who persuaded Professor Edwin R. A. Seligman of Columbia University to serve as the first chairman of the league from 1911 to 1913. Mrs. Baldwin was then elected to fill the post until 1915.

The league started its life with an interracial board—a policy that has been consistently maintained—under the direction of one of the legendary figures among black social workers, Dr. George Edmund Haynes. With one co-worker and an annual budget of $8,500, he set to work to ameliorate the terrible social and economic conditions afflicting black people.

The fledgling organization made a limited impact through expert testimony before investigating groups, counseling black emigrants to the city, providing training for black social workers, and working to bring educational and employment opportunities to blacks. After five years, the new League had affiliates in nine cities, 15 employees at headquarters, and a budget of almost $45,000. The affiliates were started because of the presence in other cities of the same type of problems that afflicted blacks in New York City.

By the end of World War I, the League had 81 paid staff members in 30 cities and a budget of $102,000. The League's board approved a reorganization plan extending the League by establishing new affiliates and providing closer supervision through district officers. It also established a model program for affiliates covering inquiry into the actual conditions under which black people lived, taking into account existing

social service agencies, their aims and accomplishments; delinquency, adult and juvenile; employment opportunities, recreation and amusement; housing; health and sanitation education; and, for large cities and major railroad centers, traveler's aid. A national board committee on education was also formed at this time.

In 1918, Dr. Haynes was succeeded by Eugene Kinckle Jones who was to head the agency until his retirement in 1941. Jones' tenure virtually paralleled the service of L. Hollingsworth Wood as chairman (1915-41).

From these humble beginnings the League has developed into a professional agency whose operations cover a wide gamut of programs and whose influence blankets the country, with affiliates in 105 cities in 35 states and the District of Columbia.

Space prevents telling the whole story on how this came about. A full account can be found in "Blacks in the City" by Guichard Parris and Lester Brooks (Little Brown, 1971) and Nancy Weiss' "The National Urban League, 1910-1940" (Oxford Press, 1974) but here are some of the highlights of the past.

Research, for example, has been a major League thrust since 1920 when Dr. Charles S. Johnson, a classic figure in black scholarship, organized the NUL's Research Department. Dr. Johnson produced numerous landmark studies on the black condition and also edited the magazine, Opportunity: Journal of Negro Life, which became a mainstay of what was known as "the Negro Renaissance," publishing almost every leading black poet and writer of the day.

Throughout the NUL's history, a major goal has been to broaden economic opportunities and throughout the 20s and 30s, the NUL concentrated on breaking barriers to black employment. Persuasion was buttressed by boycotts against firms that refused to employ blacks, pressures on schools to expand vocational opportunities for young people, constant prodding of Washington officials to include blacks in New Deal recovery programs, and a drive to get blacks into previously segregated unions, spearheaded by an imaginative campaign that set up almost 100 "worker's councils" to unionize black workers.

On the eve of America's involvement in World War Two, the League underwent a change of leadership when Lester B. Granger took over as its chief executive in 1941.

In the same year, William H. Baldwin, the son of Mrs. Ruth Standish Baldwin, one of the founders of the League, became board chairman and president of the NUL. His term expired in 1945 and he was followed as president by Lloyd K. Garrison (1945-52), descendant of the abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison; Robert W. Dowling (1952-1956), an investment broker and philanthropist; and Theodore W. Kheel (1956-60) a lawyer and labor mediator.

Jobs remained a major concern during World War Two, when the NUL strove to get blacks into defense plants, joining with A. Philip Randolph's March on Washington Movement to fight discrimination in defense work and in the armed services. Through its Industrial Relations Laboratory, the NUL was instrumental in cracking the color bar in a number of defense plants opening up job opportunities for blacks. The war years also provided impetus to the NUL's Vocational Opportunity Campaigns which were geared to the preparation of young people for meaningful employment.

During 1945 Mr. Granger served as Special Advisor to the Secretary of the Navy, and made a number of inspection visits to naval bases in this country and abroad to assist the Secretary in removing inequalities and barriers facing black enlisted personnel in naval service.

In line with his recommendations to the Secretary of the Navy, the Navy completely revised its racial policies, opening all branches of service to blacks and eliminating racial segregation in training and assignment. The other branches of the US armed forces soon followed the example of the Navy. For this service Mr. Granger was awarded first the Navy's Distinguished Civilian Service Medal and, later, the President's Medal for Merit, the highest civilian honor at the President's disposal

After the war, the League helped shape the post-war scene by expanding the role of black workers based on their successful experience in war industries. One of its most

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